

## Church Music

(From the German of M. Blaschitz by Rev. A. Lohmann)



**W**HAT induces me to write on this subject? Not the unjustifiable disdain that so many musicians show for this branch of art, nor even the shallow and generally not very happy comment one hears from the laity. No, my attempt to present some clear ideas on this subject is prompted by the strange and oftentimes incorrect views that are so often advanced by church musicians of the present day.

What do we mean by church music? All compositions intended for divine service in church. In this brief answer there is implied the superior worth of church music. Church music is an art and art is the representation of the beautiful. The essence of the beautiful does not consist exclusively in the exterior perfection. To beauty of form there must be joined a concept, an idea; in a word, the sensible is but the exterior form for the idea. It is an exigency of man's ideal content. Form direct itself to the senses; the content, to the mind. God is the most sublime and worthy object of man's mental activity. He is the source of all truth, the very principle and essence of goodness, infinite beauty itself. By as much as a form of artistic activity ap-

proaches a representation of this eternal beauty, it becomes elevated to a higher plane of excellence. And it is precisely church music that is devoted to this sublime object.

What is more particularly the object of church music? Church music is so frequently taken to be an end in itself. To this wrong view are traceable all the other errors of which I am yet to speak. The music of the Church, more than any other style of music, is distinguished by its character of service just because it is artistic activity devoted to the representation of divine beauty. In particular, then, its object is threefold. In the first place, church music should set forth the liturgical text in "intensified speech" as vividly, truthfully, and becomingly as possible, investing the dogmatic truths, moral reflections, and historical facts, as it were, with a garb of beauty, thus conveying them impressively to the minds of the faithful who listen. Next, church music should assist the faithful in their prayer, help them lay aside and forget things of a worldly nature, quiet, purify, and ennoble their minds, infuse into their hearts a spirit of devotion—in a word, lead them to God. This implies, of course, that church music ought not to be of such a kind as to disturb or distract the faithful in their prayers. A third feature

of church music is what the Church calls *ministerium vocis*, the service of the voice, because the primary purpose of church music is to serve the glory of God.

Now I have set myself the task of showing that church music is able to realize this three-fold object; I shall also point out the means whereby this object may be attained.

That it is possible for church music to meet the first class of requirements, will not be questioned by anyone who is aware of the power and influence of art-song and good program music. "The art of the church composer," says d'Ortigue, "may prove a veritable sermon, like unto the preaching of the apostles and prophets."

The means for producing this effect must be sought in the individual ability and endowment of the composer. Needless to say, the latter must understand his text, correctly grasp its liturgical import, in brief, feel and pray the text before proceeding to embody it in tone. For only what comes from the heart, speaks to the heart. But this individual text-interpretation is also bound by a restriction. It must be intelligible to the generality of hearers possessed of sound judgment and healthy sentiment and in no wise should it run counter to what they instinctively feel to be right and proper. A plaintive *Gloria* or a joyous cry for mercy, for instance, would be wholly unthinkable.

The second object of church music, i. e., the influence it should have upon the praying congregation, seems far more difficult of fulfilment. St. Justin holds that church music "kindles in the soul an ardent desire for what is extolled in the hymns," that "it quells the rebellious impulses of the senses, gives courage amid vicissitudes to the one engaged in virtue's struggle, and proves a salutary aid to devotion." According to Dante, music is the most immaterial and ethereally incorporeal of all the arts and hence most suited to assuage the torment of the senses and to strip worldly errors of their fascination in order to lead the soul through the various purifying stages to the Divinity. Palestrina's friend, St. Philip Neri, counts music among the most efficacious means by which to penetrate hearts that have become hardened by vulgar desires and worldly passions. And the German idealistic school and also Carlyle proclaim music to be the best medium for depicting visions of the Infinite. Church music, this most spiritual of the arts, more than any other art brings us in touch with the Divinity and gives expressio in chastened form to our religious sentiments which are in themselves so vague, so restrained, and beclouded owing to the sensual element in our nature. Of this we need no proof; we feel it

to be so. Church music, so Guiseppe Mozzini tells us, has its home in the Infinite and therefore tends towards the Infinite. Great thinkers are the intellectual resume of great nations and of entire epochs of time. And so we conclude that this purifying, ennobling, religious virtue has everywhere and at all times been attributed to music. The means required to make the exercise of this power possible are implied in the demand that church music should help us lay aside and forget things of a worldly nature and that it should quiet and refine our minds. This end is attained not only by soberness and spirituality of musical ideas and passionless forms, but also by well selected harmonies and the use of simple means of expression. The pure and devout lines of Gregorian melody exchew even the third and the leading note and seem to recoil from an accompanying chord of the seventh as being too soft and sensuous. (a) Though the Gregorian melodies are of imperishable beauty, they are composed of the simplest elements and are thus able to produce an effect at once chaste and religious.

Among the various means of expression which the composer has at his disposal for portraying human emotion, the human voice is, of course, pre-eminent. And of all classes of voices none is so adapted to the religious atmosphere of the church as the clear and unaffected voice of the boy. Tremulous and strongly dramatic voices are out of place in the church choir. Of all instruments the organ is the most suitable for playing accompaniments, preludes, and interludes in church; not only is it the most impersonal and hence dispassionate of instruments, but its tone also has that peculiar soothing effect which is so desirable a feature of church music.

A composer who is willing to restrict himself in his musical invention and to content himself with the simple means of expression pointed out above, need have no fear that anything of a worldly strain will ever inject itself into his music.

(a) This view may be explained in part by the fact that this article was written before the publication of some of our reputedly "model" accompaniments of plain chant.—The translator.

Things assume a different aspect when we turn to that much debated subject—instrumental accompaniment (accompaniment of instruments other than the organ). Here I shall let an eminent authority on esthetics speak. "All other instruments (other than the organ)," says Dr. Kirstein, "are less suited to an accompaniment of church song. Their tone is too sensual, too distracting for the listener.

Hence these instruments prove a hindrance rather than an aid to real devotion. Even the better class of liturgical compositions having this instrumental accompaniment—I mean the creations of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven,—are not, save to a very limited degree, in sympathy with the spirit of the Church. We cannot help being reminded of the theatre when listening to these compositions.” And with reference to those works that are again hindering their way into church with growing frequency in recent times, I feel that I ought to adduce here the views of some men whose word carries great weight. In Baeumker’s *Kirchenlesicon* VIII, 2034, we find the following: “Joseph Haydn ushers in the most brilliant period of instrumental church music. Though his intentions were the best Haydn was blinded by the irresistible glamour of instrumentation, thus his Masses became concerts in the fullest sense of the word.” And we read *ibidem*: “Ingratifying, but not soothing, not edifying,—such is the music of Cherubini.” W. A. Mozart was bound to the concert and opera and never succeeded in ridding himself of his fetters. Had he lived different circumstances, there is no doubt that his serene mind would have prompted him to produce church music of a different character. After giving a beautiful appreciation of Beethoven’s art, the above quoted book continues: “Thus while this entire composition is incomparable, grand and finished in its workmanship, it deserves to be called church music only in the sense that it is occasionally, even though very rarely, performed in some church.” Of Fr. Liszt Ambros says the following: “This music is very passionate and exciting.” Richard Wagner was a pronounced opponent of instrumental accompaniment in church. In 1849 he wrote: “Unqualified precedence in church ought to be given to the human voice, which is the immediate vehicle of the sacred word, and not to its instrumental ornament or perhaps even to the frivolous fiddling now so prevalent in church compositions; and if the music of the Church is ever to regain fully its original purity, it will have to make vocal music its sole representative.” Repeated directions from Rome (Gregory XVI, 1842; Pius IX 1856; Pius X, Nov. 22, 1903), express the same idea. Eminent church musicians like Ett, Aiblinger, Proske, Mettenleiter, Lueck, Haberl, Witt, Fr. Schmidt and many others have been laboring to refine and simplify church music. And in response to Rome’s Exhortation and encouragement a beginning has been made in many parts of the world to cultivate that purest and choicest product of Church music—Gregorian chant.

To revert to my program, I have still to speak of the refining influence of church music and to show that church music has it in its power to put us in a serious mood and lead us to God. Music can elevate and enoble only when it never descends to the frivolous, the ludicrous or the sentimental; only serious music can create a serious mood and, by its chaste and exalted forms and its deeply religious sentiment, lead us to God. I have said that church music ought never to distract us in our prayers; hence it ought to be simple and unobtrusive in character; remain in the background, as it were; never force itself upon our attention either by startling form or dazzling means of expression.

And now we come to the third feature of church music,—its contribution to the glory of God. This function of church music is usually made the excuse for any extravagance of musical display in church. The same reason, i. e., glory of God, underlies all the splendor and magnificence which the church encourages in her architecture, in her mural decorations, in her illumination, in the decoration of her altars, and in the fabrics used for her liturgical vestments. Must church music, then, deny itself this splendor? No, indeed. But church music is the vehicle of the liturgical text and as such it is subordinate to the text. The measure of display to which it is entitled, is governed by the restriction which the liturgical text imposes upon it. Let church music seek its splendor and brilliancy in pure intonation, careful, well-rounded execution, faultless enunciation, beautiful voices, and large choruses. And there is so much of beauty in the broad majestic sweep with which the tone-waves of the organ flood the sacred edifice, that there is hardly any need of further ornament in church music. Koestlin aptly describes the tone of the organ as follows: “The organ-tone impresses one as something removed to a higher sphere out of reach of all earthly human restriction; there is in it something akin to the supernatural; it is like a prelude of the Infinite; and, like the play of waves of the endless ocean, it suggests the Infinite. The same power, the same fullness in each wave as it surges and rolls on and on in the unending succession,—truly a picture of the Eternal, the Inexhaustible.” The glory of God is best served by something that is worthy of God, i. e., by something that corresponds to the recurring feats of the church and that begets in the listeners an inclination to pray and to pray devoutly. For we are not supposed to go to church to hear music, but to pray.

In conclusion I shall take up for consideration some of the false views that are quite

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current at the present day.

We hear it said that "Church music ought to have regard for the tastes of the public." Does the rest of the Liturgy cater to these tastes? Why then church music?

"The Liturgy is fixed and stable, but art is essentially progressive"—is another objection. Has the Church ever refused to avail herself of any innovation that suited her purpose? Think of Gregory's Monody, Hucbald's Organum, Guido's Diaphony, the Ars Nova of the 16th century, and the other innovations down to our time. Progress and development there was, but progress and development in conformity with the Liturgy. The correct principle in this matter is not "what is pleasing is permitted," but "What has become pleasing is permitted." And if you wish to know what is becoming you are hereby referred to the—*Motu Proprio*.

Another very frequent assertion is "the people come to church only for grand classical performances." People who go to church solely to hear the music are looking for a sensual treat and derive no spiritual or religious benefit from such attendance. And I for one do not believe that this class of people will in this way ever become accustomed again to go to church from religious motives, for I fail to see any logical cogency in the assumption that the repetition of an act done from a certain motive will of itself eventually change that motive; moreover, experience gives the lie to such an assumption.

Again, we hear the following: "We ought to be glad to have this classical church music and it is wrong to consign such works to the discard." Answer: The concert hall is the proper place in which to perform those works. It takes more than text and title to make music church music. In selecting music for the church we should not allow ourselves to be influenced by the reverence in which we hold particular composers or church musicians, nor by considerations of nationality, nor by the show that we might make with the works of "celebrities."

"Nevertheless," the objection persists, "most people desire this classical church music." If the Church were to begin to do what most people desire, we would be forced to go out of existence.

"But this or that style of church music is antiquated." Here Goethe shall answer: "Music of the better type need not be novel, rather the older it is and the more we become accustomed to it, the more power it has over us."

"But beautiful music is beautiful everywhere if only we judge it from the objective musical point of view." This is asking too much of us since the object of church music is not to concertize in church, but to serve God and the sacred functions; hence church music must be judged from an ecclesiastical point of view. By confining our judgment to purely musical criteria we shall soon find ourselves involved in the serious error of taking church music to be an end in itself; but church music is obliged to serve an idea, and only by the degree of perfection with which it serves this idea is its worth to be determined.

Finally we are told that "the people will listen to no other but this beautiful, classical music." If this means that only the so-called classical instrumental church music deserves to be called beautiful then the falsity of the implication is of itself sufficient to dispose of the objection. But is it even so very certain that the musical excellence of our celebrated figured vocal compositions and of Gregorian chant is so very much inferior to that of those much lauded "classical" instrumental masterpieces? In any case what is gained if people go to church to listen to the music and not to pray? To perform a Mass with orchestra a few times a year at extraordinary festivities in deference to an old and much cherished tradition, when the Mass is a sober and dignified conception and the instrumental apparatus is discreetly employed—this done by way of exception is both reasonable and permissible.



But the true object of church music is to help us pray devoutly and this is achieved only by music that is ecclesiastical in the fullest sense of the word. The ever pure and beautiful lines of Gregorian melody, a clear and calm vocal harmony, and the passionless voice of the organ, these are the best guides and companions of the soul in its upward tendency to God.

## On Self Expression\*

By Nina Langley

"He played the difficult 'Hammerklavier' Sonata, and he played it as Beethoven would have done."

This is what my father wrote to me when I was a schoolgirl, at the time when the great pianist, Backhaus, as a boy of about twenty-one, was beginning to astonish the world.

Suppose he had written instead: "He played the difficult 'Hammerklavier' Sonata, and he put into it so much of himself that we entirely forgot Beethoven, and thought only of Backhaus." Would that praise have been greater or less? Let us consider.

Some music is delicate and ethereal, like that of Chopin; some is strong, virile, and masculine, like Beethoven's; some is light-hearted and gay, like Haydn's; some has a touch of whimsicality about it, like Schumann's.

Some men have the poet's nature, and see beauty everywhere; some are rugged in character, with deep thoughts and deep joys and sorrows; some have bright, happy-go-lucky natures; some are humorous; some are grave. The music they write partakes of their nature and characteristics. We could not confuse Chopin's music with Beethoven's or Bach's with Schubert's. (This is, of course, greatly to be accounted for by the difference of period in which they lived, for fashions change in music, just as in clothes, or in ways of arranging the hair. But, quite apart from the question of period, the music will be much influenced by temperament.) We might consider three musicians born in (approximately) the same year (1809-10), and note how their music differs, because their temperaments differed. The three are Chopin, Mendelssohn, and Schumann. Chopin could no more have written the "Songs without Words" or the "Midsummer Night's Dream" music, than Mendelssohn could have written Chopin's lovely Nocturne in G (No. 12), or some of the wistful Mazurkas; while as for some of the quaint conceits that occur in the "Carnaval"

or the "Davidsbündler" of Schumann—neither of the others would ever have even imagined them. If we steep ourselves sufficiently (but it cannot be done in a month or two) in the music of these three men, we can read their characters in it, as we can read the character of a man by the things he says or the letters he writes.

Now, what sort of man (or woman) do you think will be most likely to interpret well a piece of Chopin's? Why, one whose character and thoughts most nearly approach those of Chopin. Similarly, the man who will play a Sonata of Beethoven's as it should be played will be the man who can most nearly bring his mind into line with Beethoven's mind. Some people *cannot* do this at all; they can only express *themselves*; and so, according as they happen to be emotional or stolid by nature, they will either perform Beethoven with much *rubato*, or play a Chopin waltz as if they were measuring off material by the yard. We all know players who can simply bring down the house with (say) Rachmaninov's Prelude in C sharp minor, or a brilliant, showy piece, but whom one would not trust within a mile of a Chopin Nocturne or a Mozart Adagio! It is just because they do not realize that what is right for Rachmaninov is not right for Chopin, and *vice versa*. A Rachmaninov Prelude is quite a different kind of piece from a Chopin Nocturne, written by quite a different kind of man, and to be interpreted in quite a different kind of way. Whatever music we try to interpret, the one thing necessary is that we should *entirely forget ourselves*, entirely put our own thoughts, feelings, wishes in the background, until we are able to envisage the piece as the composer envisaged it when he wrote it, to see it with his eyes, to hear it with his ears, to understand it with his mind, to feel it with his spirit. If we cannot at first do this, we must listen to and copy someone who can. We must seize opportunities of hearing our piece played again and again, striving to awaken something in ourselves which will correspond in any way to the music we wish to perform.

"What!" you will say, "Are we just to be mere mechanical copies of other people?" By no means. We shall never be that, because, imitate as we may, some part of ourselves will always, and rightly, colour our attempts. But you cannot draw water from an empty well; you cannot *express* what you have already no *impression* of. The eyes of the musically blind must be opened. And have *you* never returned home from hearing a work which you have played all your life, and said to yourself: "Why, I always played that in such-and-such a

\* From "S. M. R."

way. I see now that it was not the best way. What I have now heard is more in keeping with what the composer must have meant?" And straightway you adopt that rendering, coloured by your own personality (for, as I said before, the personal equation—and rightly—is always there).

There are always two sides to an interpretation—the *subjective* (that is, you who interpret) and the *objective* (the thing or the composer you are interpreting); but the objective must predominate. Thus Lamond's Beethoven will always be different from Pachmann's Beethoven, or from Backhaus's Beethoven, or from your Beethoven, in proportion as each partakes of the essence of Beethoven's mind; but they must all be Beethoven, and not Lamond, or Pachmann, or Backhaus, or you; and the more we see Lamond, or Pachmann, or Backhaus, or you in the music the less do we see Beethoven.

Think of this next time you play to a musical circle. They do not want (unless you are *very* young, and the circle happens to consist of admiring relatives, anxious to hear how you are "getting on") to hear *you*—Mary Jones—play. They want to hear a Chopin Waltz or a Beethoven Sonata played well, and the more like Chopin or Beethoven, and the less like Mary Jones it is, the better it will be. It is Chopin, it is Beethoven, that we want—not *you*. Only as you bring your mind more into line with those of the composers, and catch from their spirits sparks wherewith to kindle the flame of your spirit—can you ever hope to become a great interpreter, and in any way acceptable to us. It is for this reason that I consider the praise given to Backhaus as the greatest tribute that could have been paid: "He played the difficult 'Hammerklavier' Sonata, and he played it as Beethoven would have done."

## Studies of Phrasing

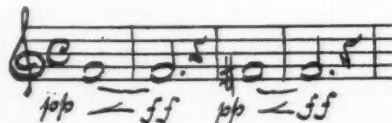
(Continued from May, 1930, Issue)

### CRESCENDO AND DIMINUENDO. MESSA DI VOCE.

In singing, it is of great importance, especially with reference to dynamics, to lay particular stress on contrasts. *Forte*, however, is seldom followed immediately by *piano* and *vice versa*. As on a painting light and shade are distributed, so do the laws of musical execution require that the *crescendo* of tones should start from the softest *piano*, from the most delicate shade of a clear aquatint, swell gradually to *mezzo forte*, *forte* and *fortissimo*, and return successively with the *diminuendo* to the vanishing *piano*. The effect of an artistically

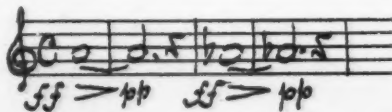
executed *Messa di voce* on one tone, or a series of tones is just as beautiful as it is difficult to produce. It is, however, an ideal which can not be attained by screaming voices, because they are unable to produce a sonorous *piano* with little breath. The greater the effort to breathe becomes in *crescendo*, the more are the vocal chords arched upwards by the expiring breath, giving them greater tension. Consequently the tone must be higher, if the singer does not understand how to paralyze this growing tension by a fine compensation of the muscular powers of the larynx. The breath lessens in the same proportion as the power of tone decreases. The arching of the chords, as well as their tension is reduced and consequently the tone becomes lower, if this tendency is not checked by the shortening of the glottis i. e., the vibrating parts of the vocal chords.

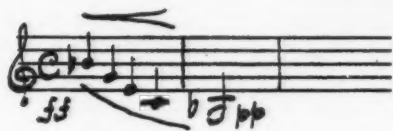
The study of *Messa di voce* should be preceded by special exercises in *crescendo* and *diminuendo*, which are to be practiced in the beginning on the vowel A (ah) and later also on the other vowels. The pupil should inhale quietly and deeply, choose any tone within his range and sing it clearly and as softly as possible, avoiding an abrupt start. He should make the tone swell gradually in one breath, remembering the rule that, in order to retain the same height, the mechanism of the larynx should be under perfect control. The following may serve as an example:



After practicing *crescendo* in this manner, the second part of the *Messa di voce* follows, viz.: *decrescendo* or *diminuendo*.

The pupil should start a tone in full power and, without flattening in the least, let it gradually die away to the softest *piano*, as follows:





The successful study of *Messa di voce* can only begin after the pupil has succeeded in singing *crescendo* and *diminuendo*, separately, on all tones of his range, with the exception of the highest and lowest, because it is too difficult to shade them. A perfect control of the breathing mechanism, as well as a clear intonation, are absolutely necessary to give a *Messa di voce* faultlessly:



The scale affords the best means for the cultivation of *Messa di voce* in ascending and descending successions of tones. *Crescendo* occurs in an ascending, *diminuendo* in a descending series. As the ascending scale symbolizes energetic aspiration—increasing power—so does the descending scale represent lessening of the same. The principal laws of phrasing require that ascending successions of tones to be sung *crescendo* and descending *diminuendo*. The character of a musical phrase, or contents of the text may, however, exceptionally, require an opposite rendition.

The tones are wonderfully animated by the artistic production of *crescendo* and *diminuendo*. Through these music acquires its great attraction, power, and soul of expression. The degree of increase always conforms with the character of the whole composition and the signification, or duration of the part on which the *crescendo* is to be placed. The effect of a well performed *crescendo* and *diminuendo*, particularly by a chorus, is simply sublime and it is even enhanced when combined with *ritardando*, or when dwelling on a hold ♯ at the end of a piece. As a circle of ripples on the clear sea enlarges until finally all the motion seems to disappear from the eye, so should the tones vanish gradually to be transported, as it were, to mysterious regions. To produce such effects in singing it is necessary that all par-

ticipants apply themselves with a will and undivided attention.

"Expression," says Rousseau, "is a quality by means of which the musician (singer) feels vividly and reproduces with energy all the sentiments and emotions he is to describe.

### III. LEGATO AND STACCATO. PORTAMENTO.

*Legato* (bound) is a close joining of the tones with strict observance of their note value and without pauses or intermediate tones, so that one tone seems to coalesce with the other. *Legato* bears the character of repose and simplicity, and is particularly well adapted to the nature of the vocal organs.

Let the pupil sing different intervals on one vowel, ascending and descending, until the binding of both tones is clear and easy, without intermediate tones and in the prescribed time. He then should take three or more tones on one vowel, (syllable) to be followed by two or more tones on different syllables. Ascending, the tones should be started accurately somewhat marked; descending, they should be sung flowingly and with ease.

*Staccato* (broken) is the opposite of *legato*. Little pauses arise from the sudden stopping of the breath between the separate tones. The sign for *legato* is a curve (˘) over the notes, *staccato* is indicated by dots over them. Practicing *staccato* too long may prove injurious to the vocal organs.

*Portamento* consists in striking the next ascending and descending interval, lightly, with the vowel of the preceding syllable. This preparing of the following tone with the syllable of the preceding one should be practiced slowly and carefully in the beginning, especially by fragile voices, to awaken the sense of gliding from one tone to another. In order to let the principal tone enter unimpaired, it is advantageous for beginners to separate each chief note from the preceding small note by a short breathing pause, which will prevent pressing. There should be a gradual improvement in the portamento, until the successful striking of the second tone with a soft breath is accomplished without a break between the first and second syllable, i. e., until the preceding soft tone unites with the principal tone. A beautiful *portamento* affords softness and expression, and is the chief embellishment of sustained song. But in this, as in other things, excess is detrimental. Now-a-days we, unfortunately, meet too often with a false *portamento*—a sentimental, impure slurring, intermingled with all possible intermediate tones, resembling whining or moaning rather than singing. It is, as Witt says, a degradation of the sublime to the ridiculous.

Therefore the nature of pure Church Music must protest against the false *portamento*, and even song itself must oppose it. For, if music is logically nothing but the declamation of the text, it is evident that a speaker would be ridiculed if he should simply give an upward slur to the syllable, which he ought to accent. In the same manner, the emphasis of the accented note is weakened by slurring; hence, this disregard for the rules of declamation opposes the nature of song in a similar manner.

The more "drawling" the less "*marcato*"; choirs practicing the former are unfit for the latter. And thus the indistinct, blurred takes the place of the clear and definite. That the singers accustom themselves by slurring to draw together, what the composer perhaps intended to be completely disconnected; that they acquire a habit of wrong breathing, allowing it to become their second nature to disfigure the design of the author, we overlook, although that alone suffices to prove the harm and offensiveness of a false *portamento*. It not only destroys the *marcato* and correct respiration, but also the important *sforzando*. For singers, thus accustomed, will, as rule, sing in the one breath as long as it can be "stretched," instead of using it judiciously, enabling them to produce with prominence and power any emphasized note in *sforzando* passages.

(To Be Continued)

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